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SUBJECT: BELARUS: REGIME NEUTRAL ON GEORGIA CONFLICT

¶1. (SBU) Utterly dependent on Russia for energy supplies and with close societal and military links, Belarusian relations with Moscow range from obeisant to defiant. At the same time, the GOB has maintained cordial relations with Georgia throughout that country's difficulties with Russia. Contacts between Minsk and Tbilisi have been friendly, with occasional digs at Moscow: during a Russian boycott of Georgian exports, the GOB publicly encouraged the import and sale of Georgian wines. Georgia opened an embassy in Minsk in January 2008. A Georgia-Belarus Business Forum saw 12 Georgian companies meet with about 30 (mostly state-owned) Belarusian firms in April, and bilateral interaction took a further step forward in May when the Bank of Georgia bought a 70 percent stake in the Belarusian Popular Bank for USD 34.2 million.

¶2. (SBU) GOB reaction to the current situation in Georgia has been subdued and cautiously neutral. Without referring to either Russia or Georgia, MFA deputy spokesperson Mariya Vanshina made a terse comment August 8, noting Belarus' "deep concern" about the bloodshed and calling for a cease-fire and negotiations for the sake of stability in Southern Ossetia and in the Caucasus. A subsequent MFA travel warning August 10 only provided contact information for Belarusian citizens affected by the conflict -- there is no Belarusian diplomatic presence in Georgia. (Note: A member of our local staff who returned from Tbilisi August 10 on a Belavia flight to Minsk reported that the Russian Embassy in Tbilisi, ostensibly protecting the interests of Belarusian citizens, was providing incorrect information about flights and departure routes. End note.)

¶3. (SBU) For its part, some members of Belarus' democratic opposition have come out in support of Georgia: a 15-person demonstration was organized across the street from the Russian Embassy by the youth group "Malady Front" August 11; they were quickly removed by the local police, who arrested 20-year-old protest organizer Lyudvisa Atakulova. The press is splitting along usual lines: the independent media have condemned Russia's aggression, while state outlets mostly follow the lines of the Russian media, blaming Georgia (and the U.S.).

Comment

¶4. (SBU) It is not in the GOB's interest to get involved or take sides; avoiding support for Moscow helps to underline the independent nature of the Belarusian regime, which is any case is not having ideal relations with Russia over energy prices. Although official Minsk seems privately convinced that Georgian President Saakashvili precipitated the conflict, Presidential Foreign Policy Advisor Valentin Rybakov told Charge August 12 that the GOB would continue to only call for negotiations and a cessation of hostilities. Rybakov unsurprisingly anticipated that the topic would arise in the course of bilateral meetings planned for next week in Sochi between Lukashenko and President Medvedev.

MOORE
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